Telephone conversation with former Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger (1973-1975). 20 April 2009.

Dr. Schlesinger.
Mr. Herman. Dr. Herman. Captain Herman. Admiral Herman.

Admiral would be fine if the pay were commensurate. I don't know whether your assistant has told you why I wanted to talk with you.
No. I've got a little note here regarding the end of the Vietnam War and its relation to what we did medically.

Not specifically that but let me give you some short background that might refresh your memory. At the end of the war, you recall there was an operation called Frequent Wind.
Vaguely familiar.

Where we put Navy ships off the coast of Vietnam and the idea was to evacuate our own embassy personnel, CIA personnel, and military advisors. It was supposed to be fixed wing originally but . . .
It was all of the choppers.

Right. All the choppers went in. But when the choppers came out loaded with all those folks, the pilots looked in their rear view mirrors and they saw huge numbers of Vietnamese helicopters following them figuring that they were going to land somewhere on those ships and they were going to land too.
That's very interesting. No, I didn't recall that or maybe I didn't know that.

They came out and . . . You probably recall the helicopters landing and pushing them over the side.
Ah, yes, yes.

And then the helos went over the side. The fellow who apparently planned some of that . . . There was a sub text to all this. . . The South Vietnamese Navy had about 35 ships left. To keep it from falling into the hands of the North Vietnamese, two gentlemen came up with a plan. One was Richard Armitage and the other was a senior captain in the South Vietnamese Navy named Kiem Do. They came up with a plan, pretty much on the fly. At least that's what I've been able to determine. The plan was to send the South Vietnamese Navy to Con Son Island off the southern coast of Vietnam and then the U.S. Navy would come and escort those remaining ships–33 of them– across to Subic Bay.
Right.

That's just part of it. One of the U.S. Navy ships, a destroyer escort, the USS *Kirk*, was somehow selected for this operation. In the middle of the night, Richard Armitage, who had gotten out of South Vietnam and landed on the flagship, the USS Blue Ridge, convinced Admiral Whitmire, the head of that operation, who he was and that he had a

plan. And at some point he went over to the *Kirk* in the middle of the night. The captain of the Kirk was then to take orders from this civilian. And at the time Armitage was working for you.

Exactly.

He then put the plan into operation and they rescued the South Vietnamese Navy and 30,000 refugees who were crawling on the decks. They had good fortune because the South China Sea was calm at the time and remained so for seven days, which was unusual, and they made it across to Subic Bay. And then from that point on, the refugee camps and all that.

It was part of a broader policy, by the way. We were going to take any equipment we could move out of South Vietnam so that it would not fall into the hands of the North Vietnamese. We got all of our F-5s out at the same time, as I recall and maybe a few other aircraft types. But we couldn't move the heavy ground equipment.

I've interviewed Mr. Armitage and he talked about coming aboard the *Blue Ridge*, getting off the helicopter. He had nothing, no ID, he had lost his wallet. He looked like he'd been through a war already because he had been up there destroying things. And he tried to convince the flag lieutenant on the deck who he was and he said that he needed to see Admiral Whitmire. He got a funny look as if "Oh, yeah, and I'm the Marx Brothers kind of thing. He then said something that made the lieutenant tell Whitmire of his presence who then summoned him to his quarters. Armitage then told the admiral, "If you don't believe me, you can wire back to my boss, Secretary Schlesinger, and he'll vouch for me. Do you remember any of that, Armitage getting in touch with you?

Not at that time. But it was an appropriate thing to say to Whitmire because I would have certainly said, "Yes, indeed. He is one of the people in charge of trying to get our people and equipment out of South Vietnam and he might have information that he should convey to you with regard to any additional plans. Admiral Whitmire did not call but Admiral Whitmire showed the good judgment he did when he was on the Navy football team.

In fact, that's how Armitage convinced him who he was. Armitage, of course, went to the Academy and was on the football team and lived in the athletic barracks. He said to the lieutenant, "You tell Admiral Whitmire that every day I dressed to go to class under his picture." Of course, Whitmire was a football hero at the Academy. That was enough to convince him. That must have been the secret handshake.

Kind of like the Skull and Bones.

Exactly. I am becoming more convinced based on what I've heard . . . And Armitage told me that they [Kiem Do and he] pretty much winged the plan--the plan to extract the South Vietnamese navy. Apparently that plan did not come from Washington. It seems to have been put together on the spot. Armitage was very creative in doing it and succeeded.

That sounds right. There was a fellow named Erich von Marbod. And they were instructed to get everything out that was moveable. But that was kind of generic thing--no detail. They had to invent the detail.

Is von Marbod still around?

I think he's still alive. I think I heard that he was in Brussels or someplace.

The other part of this operation . . . As this motley assemblage of South Vietnamese vessels and a few U.S. Navy ships approached Philippine territorial waters, the Marcos government said that they would not accept these ships. "We don't want the refugees and certainly don't want the ships because South Vietnam no longer exists." And perhaps not wanting to offend the new order, the ships would not be allowed into Subic Bay.

But negotiations took place that provided for the ships to be re-flagged and allowed on. I have not yet been able to determine at what level those negotiations went on but it was finally agreed that the ships could come in if they were re-flagged as U.S. Navy vessels. There was a successful attempt to go around to all 32 ships with U.S. flags and ceremonies were conducted aboard each one with the South Vietnamese flag being hauled down and the U.S. flag going up. Do you recall any of that?

No. But re-flagging is not that uncommon as you recall from the Persian Gulf a decade or so ago.

The so-called "Tanker War."

Yes. How were the refugees reacting to all this as they saw the Vietnam flag come down and suddenly they were under the U.S. flag?

It was a very emotional thing. In fact, this past Friday, we interviewed CAPT Kiem Do, who was one of the senior South Vietnamese naval officers. It was he and Armitage who came up with the evacuation plan. He was on one of those ships and he told us what transpired. He said they all knew what was happening when they came aboard with the flags. It was at sundown. As the flag came down aboard his vessel, thousands of refugees aboard that vessel began to spontaneously sing the South Vietnamese national anthem. Many of them were in tears. And it was very emotional because it represented not only the loss of their country, the flag being their nation's symbol and seeing the American flag go up, but it also gave them some indication of the unknown. What was going to happen to them from that point on? I think he was the senior officer aboard that ship. He took his shoulder boards and went over to the side of the ship and threw them into the sea. And the rest of the Vietnamese officers did likewise. They took the insignia off their caps and their shoulders and threw them into the ocean. He got very emotional when he talked about it so many years later.

And understandably. How did they feel when they saw the U.S. flag going up?

As he put it, there was both a sense of sadness at having lost their country but also a sense of relief that they were safe. They weren't going back to Vietnam. And that was a concern while they were at sea and the negotiations to re-flag the vessels were underway. The USS *Kirk* made a wide circular sweep in the middle of the night so that those aboard those ships would not see where the sun was. Many of them didn't know that they were making this very gradual turn. All this was to stall for time. The fear, of course, was that if they realized they were heading back west, that they were going to be taken back to Vietnam and that their future would be very bleak after that. So there was a fear on the part of the Navy that they would panic and perhaps riot.

But when the re-flagging ceremonies took place, there was the initial feeling of loss, sadness, and grief followed by that sense of relief that now they were safe, even though their future at that time was quite uncertain.

Being the Navy medical historian and studying this period in some detail . . . We're making a documentary about USS *Kirk* and this last operation of the war. I'm certainly learning a lot about the period even though I was around at the time as a member of the Air Force. In a very, very sad and chaotic ending to a very unpopular war . . .

Unnecessarily lost.

Here was a positive event. Several ships rescued 30,000 refugees. I was at the USS *Kirk* reunion two years ago and many of the refugees and now their children and grandchildren and they came to thank the sailors of the *Kirk* for saving them. I'll tell you, there was a lot of hugging and kissing at that reunion. Of course many of the sailors were young kids in their late teens and early twenties. For many of them, that event made a big difference in the lives they led afterward. And they remember that event fondly.

As they should. And proudly.

Very proudly. It was a proud moment for the Navy.

I hope that if you're going beyond the *Kirk* and the helicopters, that you give appropriate credit to those helicopter pilots, Marine and Navy, who were flying the continuous lift back to the Embassy building. Because they flew for 24 hours or something like that. Continuously. I finally said, "These guys are dropping. It's an end to the evacuation. They had exhausted themselves in this hopping back and forth to the carriers.

They were extremely skillful. There were no mishaps to my knowledge. Perhaps we should give equal credit to the Vietnamese pilots who had never landed on a ship before. Many had never flown over the ocean.

It's easier to do it with a chopper. [laughter].

It is. Today's generation has such little knowledge of that era or they have forgotten it.

They never understood it. What they did understand is that they misunderstood it, but that's another matter.

Well, sir, thank you so much for taking time with me.

Well, I'm delighted to hear that. USS *Kirk*.

Which is now in the Taiwanese navy renamed the *Fen Yang*. We're hoping in the summer to go to Taiwan. We're taking the former skipper of *Kirk*--CAPT Paul Jacobs--who lives here in Northern Virginia--to shoot a few scenes on the deck of his old command and tell his story.

Well, convey my congratulations and thanks to CAPT Jacobs.

I will do that.

In the first place . . . You're preparing a documentary?

Yes. The Navy Medical Department is preparing a documentary about the medical aspects of that whole operation.

Don't forget the heroic aspect.

Absolutely!

I hope you're preparing a paper for the *Naval Institute Proceedings* as well.

I'm writing a companion book. I just finished a book on Vietnam--*Navy Medicine in Vietnam*, which was published this past year. The last chapter is entitled "Full Circle." What it reflects is something the Navy did back in 1954, which most people don't realize. When the Geneva Accords were signed which partitioned Vietnam.

Took them out of North Vietnam.

Right. We had about 400,000 North Vietnamese were relocated to the south. And it was the U.S. Navy that provided transportation and medical care. And here in 1975 they were doing the same thing. They were taking refugees at the end of the Vietnam War, many of who they evacuated in '54. So that last chapter is what sparked the interest in the Kirk and the other ships that were involved. So I'm writing a companion book to that event.

So, the last chapter was called "Full Circle?"

Yes.

And it includes the *Kirk* episode?

Yes it does. I'd be happy to send you a copy of the book, if you'd like.

I was just asking that you might send me the pages of the last chapter.

I'd be delighted to send you the entire book.

That would be fine.

Where should I send it?

Mitre Corporation. 7515 Colshire Dr. McLean, VA, 22102 #N643

Okay. I'll get you one in the mail.

Well, thank you very much.

And I hope you enjoy it.

I've profited from this call much more than you did.

Well, thank you sir. I appreciate that. And thank you for spending time with me. It was a delight.

And a delight for me, also. Good bye.

I profited from this call